

A COMPLETE LIFE
January 21, 2007

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Psalm 19
Luke 2:22-32

**“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace . . . ,
for my eyes have seen your salvation.”**
Luke 2:29 (NRSV)

My purpose here is only to notice that the ideal of a whole or completed life now appears to have been replaced by the ideal of a merely long life. . . .

What is or what should be the goal of our life and work?

This is a fearful question and should be fearfully answered. . . .

The ancient norm or ideal seems to have been a life in which you perceived your calling, faithfully followed it, and did your work with satisfaction . . . associated generously with neighbors, grew old seeing yourself replaced by your children or younger neighbors, but continuing in old age to be useful, and finally died a good and holy death.

To me, at my age, the main question is, “Can I be a grateful man when I die?”

Can I remember up to and on the last day that I had a very good life?”

Wendell Berry
The Way of Ignorance
and a *Christian Century* interview

I love that image: an old man cradling a child in his arms, looking into the infant’s face and saying, “I can go now. I’ve seen the hope of the world. I’ve held the future in my arms.”

Something like that happens at every infant baptism. Not only the minister but the entire gathered congregation holds the child, blesses the child, and in the baptized child sees and experiences something of God’s providence and love and hopeful promise.

When he was six weeks old, his parents brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem. The Law of Moses stipulated that the firstborn son was to be presented to God in the temple. While they were there, they met two

interesting old people, Simeon and Anna. Both of them, in their advanced years, spent most of their time in the temple, attending the daily prayers and sacrifices, participating in all the rituals, perhaps helping out here and there. Every church has to have a few Simeons and Annas. We certainly do.

When old Simeon sees Mary and Joseph and their baby, he takes the child in his arms and says the most remarkable thing:

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace . . . ,
for my eyes have seen your salvation
which you prepared in the presence of all people.

The older version and more familiar:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace . . . ,
for my eyes have seen thy salvation.

It's called, in church tradition, the Nunc Dimittis, and it is the evening prayer offered daily in monasteries throughout the world. I have always loved this incident from the day, years ago, when I handed my firstborn into the arms of my parents and my wife's parents and our grandparents and realized that something very important had just happened, something timeless, to years of witnessing what happens in a congregation when a child appears in worship and is baptized, right up to the present as I hold my own grandchildren. I love Simeon for obvious existential reasons. I'm a lot more like him than I used to be. As Martin Marty quipped on one of his birthdays, "I look in the mirror and wonder who the old guy is looking back at me."

Poet, author, Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry, who is in his mid-seventies, thinks and writes about the mystery of life and growing old. In an essay, "Quantity vs. Form," he reflects on the idea of a "Completed Life"—a whole life—and refers to a classic biography of Lord Nelson and the account of his role in the Battle of Trafalgar written by British historian Robert Southey. Berry is a pacifist but nevertheless was impressed that Nelson went into the battle prepared to die. His lieutenants advised him to disguise himself on the deck of his flagship in order to save himself. Nelson refused. He would wear his admiral's traditional frock coat, with all its bright medals and sash, thus making himself a prime target. He would live and fight as himself. He was forty-seven. And he was killed in the battle. The historian Southey writes, "He cannot be said to have fallen prematurely, whose work was done" (*The Way of Ignorance*, p.83).

Wendell Berry suggests that there was a "formal completeness" about Nelson's life that "had little to do with its extent and much to do with its accomplishments and Nelson's own sense of its completeness."

Berry thinks we have lost that sense of completeness in our obsession with more of everything—including life expectancy. We have come to believe that there is an infinite, inexhaustible supply of everything, including life, and we are entitled to it.

I was privileged to be part of a conversation with him on this subject when he was here last fall. Speaking about his own age and the prospects for the years ahead, he said, and I wrote down, “To me, at my age, the main question is, ‘Can I be a grateful man when I die? Can I remember up to and on the last day that I had a very good life?’” A completed life.

We spend a great deal of money in this culture to disguise and deny the process of aging. We are obsessed with youth and youthfulness and hold on to its vestiges for dear life. Part of that is healthy and good and life affirming. “Do not go gentle into the night,” the poet said. We shouldn’t, and I don’t intend to. But I might have added, “Don’t make a fool of yourself. Don’t make yourself ridiculous trying to pretend you are something you are not.”

The late Joseph Sittler, who taught theology at the University of Chicago, thought and wrote a lot about aging, which he called an “awkward problem.” We’re part of a culture that thinks it can fix everything, make everything right. And in that culture, he said, aging—and death—are regarded as failures, “awkward problems” that we need to fix or at least deny. A far better idea, Sittler taught, was to think about aging as the goal of life, God’s plan, God’s will, a time, he said, “for remembering, of gathering up and sorting out, discriminating between the abiding and the evanescent, of passage from knowledge to wisdom, from simple awareness to insight” (*Gravity and Grace*, p. 120).

The topic is important and relevant. We are on the cusp, in this culture, of a huge increase in the number of older people—over sixty-five—and that includes me. There are about 37 million of us now, 13 percent of the population. Those numbers will increase dramatically in the next decade as the Baby Boomers join our ranks. And because of increased life expectancy, more and more will live longer and longer.

An important component of this church’s outreach ministry is with people we used to call senior citizens, and then older adults. Our Center for Older Adults serves members and neighbors with its wide range of great programs and opportunities from aerobic exercise to book studies to trips to the theater. In anticipation of the demographic change that will happen and the increase in the number of older people, the Center for Older Adults Director, Patty Jenkins, and staff engaged in a strategic planning process and have determined to launch into a bold and creative new future. Focus group research revealed something important: namely that older people

don't feel old, don't regard themselves as old, and won't become part of an enterprise that uses the word *old* or *older* to describe itself. In fact, they know something important. It is prime time, a great time, a hopeful time, and, for most people, there will be a lot of it. And so the Center for Older Adults becomes today the Center for Life and Learning, and to launch it today, the new Center invites us all to a reception after worship in Anderson Hall with a little lively jazz as accompaniment. And I invite and encourage you—if you qualify—to become part of it.

Part of the way we think about aging is the traditional retirement age of sixty-five. Otto von Bismarck is the culprit. He's the one who set the retirement age in Germany at sixty-five, not on the basis of gerontological research, but because the Social Security system was going broke and sixty-five was the age when most people died. And so if everyone worked on average until that age, paid in, and died, the system would remain solvent.

I know people who retired at sixty-five and are busier and happier than ever: gardening, painting, walking, traveling, needlepointing, climbing mountains, sailing around the lake, driving to and from grandchildren's soccer games, swimming meets, and orchestra concerts, and loving it—and because they are not hurried, loving it more than they were ever able to love their own children's exploits. And we all know people who retired at sixty-five and who shouldn't have and don't know what to do now. In a conversation with an attorney, a good friend, not long ago I asked if he had retirement plans. He was a little indignant. "Of course not!"—actually it was a little stronger than that—"I've spent forty years learning how to do this job. I finally know how, and I intend to continue doing it."

Two of my best friends in the world, Bob Bohl and John Cairns, retired at sixty-five, and I received reference calls for both last week. They're both going back to work.

What a tragedy if productive life ended at sixty-five. There's a wonderful vignette about the late Ty Cobb, one of the best—some would say the best—hitters ever to play the game of baseball. Decades after he retired from baseball, a reporter asked, "Mr. Cobb, what do you think you'd hit if you were playing these days?" Cobb, whose lifetime average was .367, still the highest in the history of the game, said, "Oh, if I played today I'd hit .290, maybe .300," which for the uninitiated is still superb hitting, enough to earn a multimillion-dollar contract. The reporter responded, "So you'd hit .290 or .300 because of all the travel, the night games, the artificial turf, and all the new pitches like the slider, right?" "No," Cobb said, "I'd only hit .300 because I'm seventy."

What a tragedy had Dave Brubeck retired at sixty-five. Brubeck at eighty-six composes, travels the world nonstop, playing his marvelous jazz, playing better than ever.

At ninety-three, Bernard Shaw wrote one of his best pieces.

At eighty-eight Michelangelo designed a church.

At eighty-two Winston Churchill wrote his monumental four volumes, *History of the English Speaking People*.

How poorer the world would be if everyone stopped doing what they do best at sixty-five.

Norman Cousins was the longtime editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature* and a leading American intellectual. When he became gravely ill and successfully battled his disease to a standstill, he wrote a book about it, *Anatomy of an Illness*. In it he describes his friendship with people who continued doing what they did best until late in life. His description of visiting Pablo Casals, great cellist, composer, conductor, in his nineties, in his home in Puerto Rico, is a classic.

I was fascinated by his daily routine. . . . At about 8:00 a.m. he walked into the room on his wife's arm. He was badly stooped, his head was pitched forward, he walked with a shuffle. His hands were swollen and his fingers pinched.

He arranged himself with some difficulty at the piano bench. . . . I was not prepared for the miracle that was about to happen. The fingers slowly unlocked. His back straightened. He seemed to breathe more freely. Now his fingers settled on the keys. Then came the opening bars of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier" played with great sensitivity and control.

Then he plunged into a Brahms concerto, and his fingers, now agile and powerful, raced across the keyboard.

Having finished the piece, he stood up by himself, far straighter and taller than when he had come into the room. He walked to the breakfast table with no trace of a shuffle, ate heartily, talked animatedly, finished the meal, then went for a walk on the beach. (pp. 72-73)

Deep in our tradition is a new way of thinking about the entire continuum of human life, from youth to middle age to old age, from beginning to end, birth to completion. In the tribal, nomadic culture from which Israel came and from which Judaism and Christianity have their own origins, in that

ancient culture, aging was a problem. When the tribe is constantly on the move, always looking for food and forage and water, one who is crippled or sick or slow, unable to keep up, is a major problem. Some scholars suggest that the Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and mother that your days may be long," is intended to prevent the practice of simply abandoning the elderly when they could no longer keep up.

An alternate idea is there at the heart of religious tradition, a way of thinking and a culture that respects, honors, and continues to have high expectations for its elders. The real intent of the Fifth Commandment, the scholars teach us, is not that children treat parents politely, but a social system in which the elderly are regarded as parents of all, who, for the health of the culture itself, have a place and a role to play.

There is an alternate way to think about aging—as a cultural phenomenon and as a very personal one, for there is nothing more true than the fact that every one of us, regardless of where we are on the spectrum, every one of us is aging. This alternate way is embedded deeply in our religious tradition, and it is that aging is not diminishment and loss but maturation and growth, not loss but completion—and another thing: freedom. Erik Erikson said that old age is a time of integrity, of absolute honesty. When Artur Rubenstein was eighty, someone noted that he was playing the piano better than ever. In a much-quoted vignette, Rubenstein agreed and explained, "Now I can take chances I never took before. You see, the stakes are not so high. I can afford it. I used to be so much more careful. No wrong notes. No too bold ideas. Now I let go and enjoy myself and to hell with everything but the music."

It reminded me of Alan Arkin's portrayal of a grandfather in *Little Miss Sunshine*. He is outrageous, over-the-top, morally offensive, reprehensible. But in the middle of a frantic, almost desperate, and very funny road trip, he keeps a dysfunctional family grounded and gives to his grandchild a great gift, the gift of confidence and unconditional love.

There is an alternate way of thinking. It is deep in our religious tradition — aging not as loss but as a great and precious gift. Aging not as declining but moving into the future toward completion.

Douglas John Hall, one of the most distinguished theologians of our age, is still teaching at McGill University. Hall has struggled with cancer, is now in good health, approaching his eightieth birthday. In his Christmas letter he wrote, "As I grow older I find myself drawn to the contemplation of the past. . . . Life is, after all, such an amazing journey. . . . It's extraordinary, this human sojourn."

And then like old Simeon, holding the child in his arm, Professor Hall looked ahead: "The idea of Divine Providence becomes very real at this stage. When you're thirty or forty you can't quite say this—there is still much that has to be left to chance. But as you near eighty, I find you can say most days 'It's true. We are not alone, we *do* live in God's world.'"

And he concluded, "May you have some sense of that Providential presence through the coming year—even if you're nowhere near eighty!"

Robert Browning wrote:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in his hand
Who saith "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

Amen.